How Can I Support My Struggling

Fourth Grade Readers?

Tina Janis

The College of New Jersey-RTC

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Instructor: Claudia Gentile

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"We learn to do well what we learn to love."

-Pam Allyn

Introduction

In fourth grade, students are making the transition to become more sophisticated readers. My goal as the classroom teacher is to increase their critical thinking skills and to connect reading instruction to all areas of the curriculum. This is made more challenging if readers are struggling in areas such as expression of their reading and basic comprehension strategies. An obstacle I face this year is building the time within the day to address all of the components of successful literacy instruction. In my daily reading instruction I fight the battle against time and often feel like I am not meeting the needs of every student.

The purpose of my action research is to incorporate research based strategies into my literacy block and to strengthen what I already have in place. This year I have a number of students who are considered struggling readers, many of whom have just exited a form of intervention service. It is my hope that they progress enough this year to not require intervention services again next year and leave with strong reading skills. In order to do so, my literacy block does require reorganization in order to address their needs, yet also benefit the other successful readers in my classroom.

Therefore, my overarching research question is: *How can I support my struggling fourth grade readers*? I came to this topic of aiming to improve the reading skills of my struggling readers early on in the school year. My biggest motivator in pursuing this topic is the population of my classroom this year. I have many high readers out of my 19 students that are capable of leading discussions, sharing their ideas and taking learned strategies to heart. However, I have 5

general education students who I feel are in need of more of my attention and instructional

support with regards to their reading abilities. Three of the five students (boys) just exited our

basic skills program for reading at the end of last year because their reading, according to district

assessments and teacher input, was performing at a level that no longer required these services.

One young man was just dismissed from the ESL program yet performs below grade level in

reading and writing. The last student, a girl, has not ever received interventions for reading yet is

struggling with comprehension and understanding of vocabulary. She is currently in the process

of being tested for special education services. If she does become eligible, my concern then

becomes that she has unfortunately missed critical stages of her reading development.

Each of these students performed in the partially proficient or low proficient range in

their NJASK scores from third grade. Early observations in my classroom have shown that they

struggle with sharing ideas during class discussions, as well as require frequent teacher prompts

to expand answers and engage in higher level questioning. This also carries over to their writing

which displays spelling deficits and lacks proper grammar/sentence structure. They do not have

a wide base of vocabulary in their speaking or writing. Through observations of their reading

behaviors in small group, they are not active readers who monitor their comprehension which in

turn causes comprehension difficulties. I want to enhance our small group meeting time by

igniting an enthusiasm for reading with these struggling readers. The dynamic of this group of

readers is so different from the rest of my reading groups. One of my thoughts is if their

motivation was to improve, their risk taking and carry-over of skills may also.

My literacy block currently consists of a whole group reading period followed by

"centers" in which groups of students rotate through the same three activities each day. These

centers are guided reading, reading games with access to computer time, and independent

reading. I feel the time my struggling readers spend outside of guided reading is not the best use of their time. Games are motivating and do help to build their communication skills, but they focus on word work and do not necessarily work at building their reading skills. Independent reading is a challenge for this group because they are not motivated to do so and are choosing books that are not appropriate for their level. Finding more time to conference with them and holding them more accountable for their time in independent reading is needed, yet I want to balance it with keeping that time enjoyable for these students.

I am feeling that with additional changes and ultimately the focus on Common Core within my district that building these students reading skills is critical. The demands are increasing for all of our students and I need to find ways to support my struggling readers and show them success.

I have always had a passion for reading instruction, since beginning my career as a first grade teacher. I had plans to pursue a certification as a reading specialist (and hope to still do so one day) and so it remains an area of interest for me. I want to incorporate one of my biggest professional passions, literacy instruction, with my mission to promote student learning and in turn produce enthusiastic and engaged life-long learners.

Literature Review
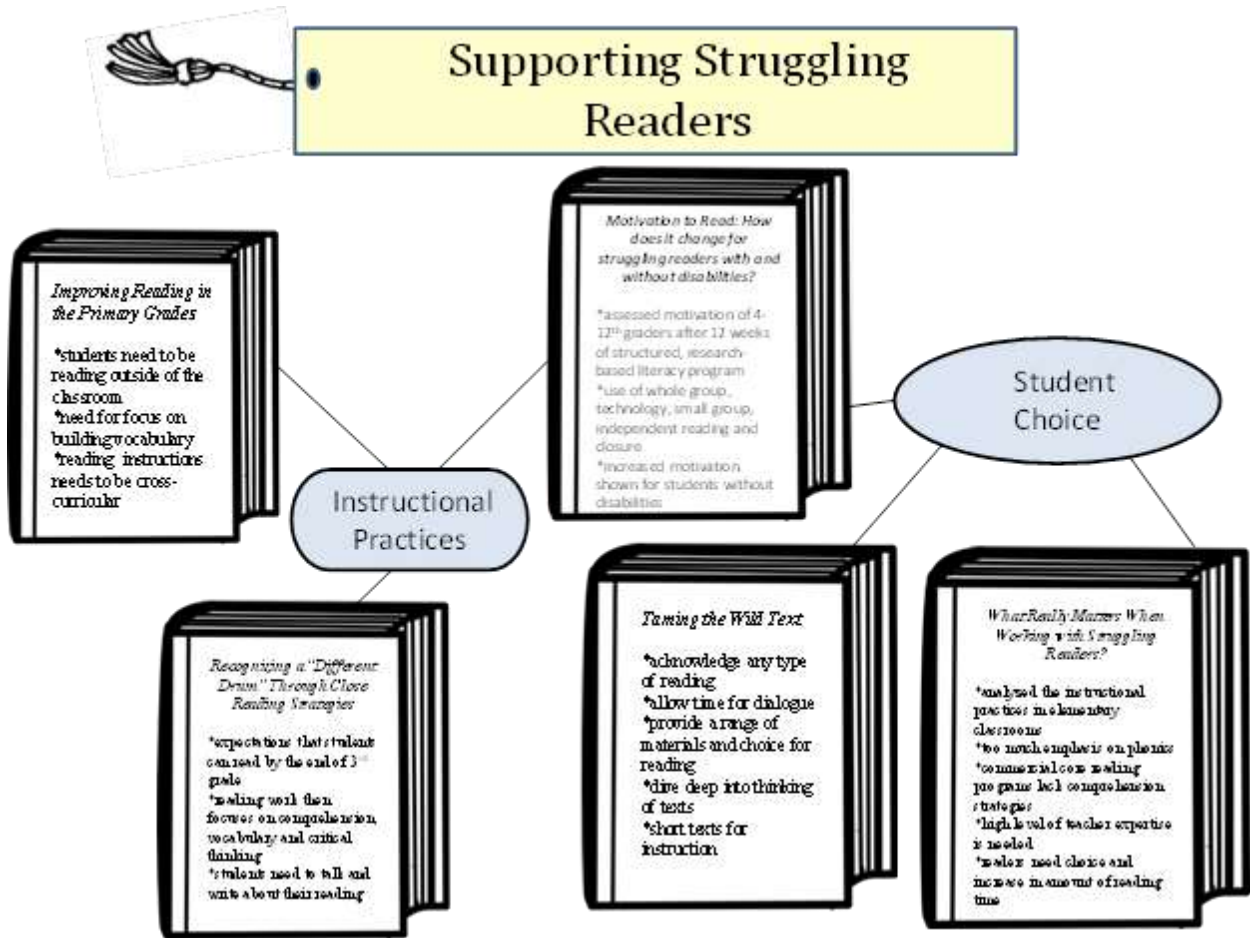
Once students begin to enter the intermediate grades, there is a significant shift from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. As a fourth grade teacher, my literacy instruction focuses on building comprehension skills and increasing the critical thinking of readers. Given the demands of the intermediate curriculum and the shifts with Common Core standards, there are high expectations for my students as readers. My challenge has become, how do I best meet the needs of my struggling readers? My goal of this action research plan is to reevaluate my literacy block and aspects of my instruction in order to support the struggling readers in my class.

Much of a student's academic success is dependent upon their reading abilities, particularly within the content areas. I believe that fourth grade is a critical time in helping my

students to solidify the foundations for reading and to build them up as active and engaged readers across the curriculum.   This year I have several students who no longer receive the support of basic skills instruction or ESL (English as a Second Language), yet are just below grade level with their reading skills.   I want to ensure the progress of these students in the year they are with me and to focus on skills such as fluency, vocabulary and self-monitoring strategies.   It is my hope that reevaluating aspects of my literacy instruction to address these particular readers that noticeable gains will be observed. The following articles have provided me with reassurances about aspects of my literacy instruction as well as ideas for guiding the changes in my instruction in order to meet the needs of my struggling readers.

The first article, *Improving Reading in the Primary Grades* by Nell K. Duke and Meghan K. Block, follows up on the recommendations for reading instruction since the publication of the National Research Council's report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* in 1998. The author's analyzed the recommendations from the report and how they are being carried over into primary classrooms (grades K-3). The article considers the progress and results made in improving reading instruction in recent years.

The instructional approaches identified in the report as effective strategies were as follows: access to early childhood schooling, word-reading skills, vocabulary instruction, conceptual and content knowledge, direct instruction of comprehension strategies, and outside-of-school reading.   It was found that improvements in education had been made in ensuring access to kindergarten and in increasing to full day programs. Also, word-reading, that is the instruction of decoding and word recognition, has increased in its instructional time and has demonstrated gains in student progress. However, it was found that the areas of vocabulary

instruction and reading comprehension skills are still lacking in the amount of instructional time tor student gains.

There were several obstacles that are noted in the article as to why these areas of comprehension and vocabulary are possibly still lacking, in some respects, in primary literacy instruction. These include limited time in the day to address all components, a focus on the "easier to learn" reading skills, and lack of teacher expertise in teaching the more challenging strategies of comprehension, vocabulary and content reading.

A question that is raised, and not only from the article, but from the push with Common Core and curriculum changes, is why aren't teachers being provided with the training and expertise needed for such comprehensive literacy instruction? Professional development and articulation across grade levels may begin to provide teachers with the knowledge and tools for preparing their students. I began my career as a first-grade teacher and found that much of my instructional time was in teaching my students phonics, concepts of print and learning to read. When I made the jump to third and then fourth grade, there was a shift in reading instruction that took much time and effort for me to become accustomed to and I found very little supports readily available to me.

This article also brings to light the notion that comprehension strategies and vocabulary building are just as critical in the primary grades as the other components of literacy.   The stakes are higher now in education, even for our youngest students, and we need to be sure we are addressing all aspects of what creates a successful reader. On the other hand, this article only focuses on the recommendations of one national report, whereas there are other reports that may

have a greater influence on policy changes, which were not considered for the purpose of this article.

My belief is that we need to continually evaluate the practices we are implementing in our classrooms, especially with regard to literacy instruction. There is a need for more vertical articulation across grade levels so that all educators involved understand the expectations for our students. This is a need that is expressed in my own school building and our administration is working towards providing us with. We are all stakeholders in the success of our students and having time to build that communication and commonality is critical.

In the next article, *Recognizing a "Different Drum" Through Close-Reading Strategies* by Cynthia A. Lassonde, she includes a quote from an Alliance for Excellent Education's 2005 publication:

For the most part, we stop teaching our children how to read when they leave third grade, and expect that they'll be able to expand vocabulary and comprehension skills on their own. While this may work for some students… [some] never make the necessary transition from learning to read to reading to learn. (p.1)

This was an action research study conducted by a university professor in collaboration with an 11th grade English teacher (Lassonde) in upstate New York. The two educators developed a unit on individualism which had the students utilize close reading techniques and strategies in order to improve their reading comprehension.

The author states that increasing students reading comprehension should be an educational priority and that students need to be taught to read as critical thinkers. With close reading strategies as the crux of their instruction, the author defines close reading in this study as

a group of strategies that build critical thinking as a response to texts. These strategies emphasize understanding vocabulary as a reader, language use, syntax and determining the meaning of the text. Close reading strategies also support the recommendation that effective instruction develops readers' ability to talk and write about their comprehension. The strategies were modeled and taught to the students throughout the unit. Other aspects of the unit included combining content area instruction with reading to provide opportunities for students to respond to text in meaningful ways. Double entry journals were utilized so students could provide a written reflection of their reading along with the use of highlighters and marking the text were also taught.

This action research found that students did make progress with risk taking and in questioning the authors of the studied texts. It was noted that teaching students to self-monitor also increased their understanding of vocabulary and led to a better visualization and understanding of the text. Taking time to provide and share models of insightful responses increased motivation and risk taking. Students saw themselves as more competent readers with an increased sense of confidence and by the end of the unit developed a more positive view of themselves as readers.

This article demonstrated the successful use of close reading strategies with high school students, yet would similar results be found with younger students? Some debate has arisen that close reading takes some of the "enjoyment" out of reading by requiring students to reread a text several times, each time with a different purpose in mind.   At such a young age, motivation and engagement are also factors to be weighed in order to increase a student's academic success.

A positive result from this action research was that these students felt more comfortable in taking risks as readers and viewed themselves more positively as readers. The research also allowed for two professionals to collaborate on implementing strategies for the benefit of students. Their expertise in their respective areas strengthened the strategies that were being implemented. However the analysis of the results in the formalized manner of an action research paper created time constraints for the classroom teacher in the study. It is also noted that the "success" of close reading strategies within this study was documented through teacher observations and student perceptions. This in itself is considered valid qualitative research yet with the high stakes atmosphere we are now surrounded by in education, it would be interesting to see the performance of these students on a more formal assessment.

The close reading approach to reading instruction is one that is increasing in use. It is not an approach that is officially implemented in the elementary school I work in, but do know it is being discussed among administration and reading specialists in order to strengthen our literacy instruction. In my readings and personal research of close reading, I have begun to implement some of the techniques, such as coding and approaching text with a specified purpose. Through these early attempts at close reading, I have seen positive changes in my students' reading habits and self-monitoring skills. Being that close reading is a strategy that will most likely be expected in my classroom and the early results I have personally seen, I would like to remain ahead of the curve and have an idea of what may work or not for my students.

The third article titled *Motivation to Read: How Does it Change for Struggling Readers with and without Disabilities?* by Macid A. Melekoglu and Kimber L. Wilkerson was a study that examined whether reading motivation of 45 struggling readers, with and without disabilities, changed after an eighteen week period of reading instruction in two elementary schools and one

high school in the Midwest US. It had been noted that motivation to read is a critical factor in

getting students involved in reading and improving their reading skills. The purpose of this

study was to analyze reading instruction at the upper grades being that there is a shift to high

content demands at this level. The program combined teaching methods which included whole

group, small group, and technology-integrated instruction. After each period and rotations, there

was a 10 minute closure to allow students to share their reflections.   This took place every day in

blocks of 90-100 minutes.

The findings of this study showed that reading motivation of students with disabilities

decreased while those without disabilities revealed marked improvement, particularly within

perceptions of their self-concept. As they developed their reading skills, they started to think

positively about their reading abilities. However, the survey results after the program changes

presented results that did not significantly change their ideas about the importance of reading.

This then leads to the question for future inquiries, how can we help students see the importance

of reading in their lives? Also, how can we as classroom teachers of older students, reach every

student, particularly those with disabilities in the area of reading instruction and motivation?

The strategies implemented for this study reaffirms, for the most part, what is currently

underway in my literacy instruction. The strategies of technology-based reading instruction,

choice and variety for independent reading, along with a range of assignments and projects.

Constructive feedback to students' reading gains was also provided and found as a crucial

component to their successful outlook.   Allowing time to meet with peers to discuss their own

progress and reading habits provided positive gains for these student readers. Unfortunately, the

sample size of this study was forty-five students which spanned from grades 4-12. The results

may yield differently had it focused on a particular grade level with a similar sample size.

This article reaffirms that the essential components of my literacy instruction are in place and can support the building of motivation and engagement for my struggling readers.

The next article titled *What Really Matters When Working With Struggling Readers,* written by Richard Allington, a professor at the University of Tennessee. The article focuses on instructional practices for the teaching of beginning readers and suggestions for what educators should be doing in their classrooms. Allington stresses that as educators, we need to evaluate our reading instruction and ensure it is based on sound, research-based results.

Allington's claims are in reference to the National Reading Panel's 2000 report. His recommendations begin by stating that too many schools are buying into reading programs that are essentially seeking entrepreneurial gain. Too many core reading programs don't provide enough guided practice or follow the gradual release model of reading comprehension strategies. He also warns against excess instruction on explicit and systematic phonics instruction. He brings up the practice of teaching young children to decode nonsense words because it may undermine other self-regulating strategies when working within a text. The suggestion is that there is no one best practice for decoding skills and so we need to develop teacher expertise in differentiating in this area for young readers. Other recommendations include not allowing paraprofessionals to provide literacy instruction to struggling readers, a practice that is happening in many classrooms, because they lack the expertise needed. Young readers also need to spend more time on independent reading in order to develop the skills and strategies they are being taught. Struggling readers in particular are not being given enough time to read text independently.

I believe this article recommends some very sound practices, yet again raises the question as to how teachers can implement effective literacy instruction without supports, core resources, or professional development.   The stakes are being raised for building critical thinkers and active readers yet how are we to do this with so many constraints on our time and resources?

This article is yet another which supports the idea that comprehension strategies are an essential component of reading instruction, even in the early years. The recommendation that struggling readers do not spend enough time with "eyes on text" caused me to pause and reflect on this in my own practices. It is an important consideration for how I organize my literacy instruction so that my struggling readers are not just receiving more direct instruction to strengthen their skills, but more time to develop their reading independently.

The last article *Taming the Wild Text* written by an educator, Pam Allyn, who has guided a reading program for boys at a residential school in New York City, many of whom struggled with reading and did not describe reading as a positive experience. Through her program and work with these boys, Allyn suggests ten actions to create a reading culture for children.

Some of Allyn's suggestions include providing a variety of reading materials and to value different forms of reading such as graphic novels, directions to a video game, etc. Also, match reading to students' interests and encourage dialogue about reading. Teach students to dive deep as readers with rich conversations about text and to motivate this through journaling, blogging, and across classroom discussions. Young readers also need to build stamina through quick reads and to keep a log of their reading lives. At the heart of this article is the message to nurture a love of reading for all children at a young age being that it is one of the strong predictors of future success in school and in life.

The recommendations provided by Allyn ring true in my beliefs as an educator and in the path I am carving as a literacy teacher. Her recommendations are in line with much of the research in the field of supporting struggling readers. Allyn's recommendations about placing value on the different forms of reading is one that teachers and parents should consider as it may be the first step in developing successful readers. Too often we stress reading "grade appropriate" text and not put into context what may motivate our students to be better readers.

After analyzing these articles, I plan to incorporate many of these research based strategies into my literacy block and to strengthen what I already have in place. My literacy block does require some reorganization in order to address the needs of my struggling readers yet also benefit the other students in my classroom.

My goal is to build in more choice for my struggling readers so as to increase their motivation. Being that technology is also shown to motivate readers; I will incorporate the use of a program, *RAZ Kids*, to help strengthen the oral reading fluency and basic comprehension skills of my struggling readers.

The approach to my literacy block will be more individualized in each day's expectations. I will continue to begin with whole group instruction with a focus on several close reading strategies. As students move into centers, where small group reading instruction occurs, the work outside of teacher instruction will be more suited to each group of readers. My struggling readers will be given more time with me for monitoring their instruction and providing feedback, yet also include RAZ Kids and discussion circles, components they have not had time to engage in before. These changes will require careful planning on my part and attention to creating structure and organization to a period that will be different for many groups

of students. The work needs to be meaningful and serve to create an environment of active and engaged readers who have strong foundations for reading success.

Methodology

Participants

My classroom is a fourth grade inclusion classroom of 19 students. The focus of my study was on five specific students who were assessed in October and found to be reading just below or at the beginning of a fourth grade level. It is these five students who I identified as my struggling readers.

Four of the five students, males, had received BSI or ESL support programs up until the end of third grade. In working with them as fourth graders, they demonstrated struggles with higher level questioning and verbal expression of reading skills. The fifth student, a female, had never received intervention services but displayed early on similar struggles in reading. However, we also had other academic concerns for her as she struggled across the curriculum. Over the course of my research, my co-teacher and I recommended she be evaluated for special education services. By the end of my study, she was classified as OHI (Other Health Impaired) and qualified for special education services. Being that she was already in an inclusion setting and interventions were already in place, her program did not change drastically.

These five students were placed in a reading group together for the purpose of small group reading instruction. Being that choice and gender would play a role in my literacy instruction, I had another student, a female special education student; join the group for the research period. She was chosen because her reading level was closest to that of this focus group. We felt that she may be able to handle the demands and instructional direction of this

group. Her joining the group allowed for both girls to have a same-gender partner within their small reading group. Although this sixth girl was not in my original focus group and research plan because she is a classified student, it was interesting to see her growth in comparison to the general education students in my focus group.

So it was these students, who were struggling to meet early grade level expectations in reading and coupled with the increasing demands of Common Core literacy standards and district initiatives, which were the impetus to address this as my action research.

Types of Data and Data Collection Procedures

I collected data over a ten week period using several methods to gauge the progress and performance of my struggling readers. The sources of data were a reflection journal, student surveys, and documents of student work.

The reflection journal was kept by me to record the challenges and successes that occurred in reorganizing my literacy block. I anticipated that the initial stages would be overwhelming because it took careful planning to coordinate meaningful activities for various groups of readers. Being that I also work with an inclusion teacher, her cooperation and support was a critical component to the success of these changes. My reflections also noted my informal observations of my focus group of readers and kept evidence of their growth with respect to the changes made. I was able to journal at least once a week and in some weeks, several times, depending on my observations.

It was also important to consider the attitudes and feelings of these struggling readers in order to meet their needs and find the best approach to building their reading skills. Their responses to a survey helped to direct my instruction and provide insight into their own feelings

as readers. The survey used (See Appendix B) was a modified version of the Adolescent

Motivation to Read Survey (AMRS). The survey measured student perceptions of their reading

skills and of themselves in relation to others. The survey was given prior to the start of the

action research. A student survey was also administered at the end of the research and

implementation period. This survey consisted of more open-ended responses since I felt it

provided better insight into students' perceptions.

Lastly, documents of student work were collected to monitor their progress as a reader

and their ability to apply learned skills. Such documents included comprehension quizzes and

student notebooks with responses to and reflections of their reading.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Before beginning my research plan, I spoke to my building principal, reading specialist

and supervisor of elementary education so that I could fine tune my action plan. These

conversations were particularly helpful in keeping the focus of my research manageable as well

as move in a direction for the district's vision of our literacy block.

Being that my research would analyze student perceptions and feelings as readers, I

needed to obtain permission from the parents of all students in my class so that I could

administer surveys. It was also an opportunity to inform them of changes which would occur

during our literacy block. Within a few days, all 19 students had permission to actively

participate in my action research. Student surveys were then administered to all students with

special attention being given to the responses of the five students in my focus group. After the

initial student surveys were given, I analyzed the responses of the focus group students and

compared them to the remaining student responses. Being that the survey consisted of multiple

choice responses, I immediately noticed that the responses of the focus group did not vary

greatly from the rest of the students. Surprisingly, the focus group had very positive self-images

of themselves as readers. Their views were not significant enough to note as a difference from

other, more advanced readers.   I felt that I need more information to guide the direction of my

research, so I then administered open-ended questions to the entire class. These responses

provided me with more detailed information and more varied responses from all students.

At the conclusion of the research period, all students then answered the open-ended

questions again. Additional questions were added as well such as, *"What did you think about the*

changes to our Reader's Workshop time?" and *"What do you like/not like about Reader's*

Workshop?" I took time to read through all student responses, with careful attention being made

to the responses of the focus group students. I was able to note recurring themes and responses

among the focus group and compare them to those of the larger group. I noted commonalities

among all students and any responses which specifically addressed my research sub-questions.

I then read through my journal reflections over the research period. After reading

through the entries several times, I was able to pull out some common themes and feelings about

my literacy block. I also compared my reflections to the student responses to note any

similarities or differences in our views of the literacy block.

After reading through student responses and my journal entries, I also took time to

discuss my observations with my co-teacher. Although many of the changes during the literacy

block more directly affected my reading groups, the whole group approach and organization of

the block did have some effect on her groups. I took into account her observations as we went

through the action research period, as well as her feelings as to how we can proceed in the future.

Our informal conversations often confirmed my observations and interpretation of the data. As I

moved into interpreting the data from the student surveys, my reflection journals and samples of

student work, I kept in mind my sub-questions that have guided the decision-making for my

action research:

*What current instructional practices are showing success with readers that I can continue or add

to my literacy instruction?

*How can I increase my students' critical thinking skills?

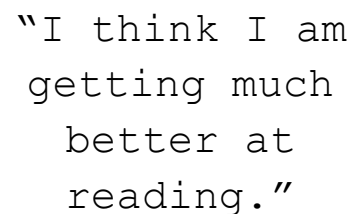*Will changes in my literacy instruction affect student perceptions and motivation in reading?

*How can I incorporate district expectations into my literacy instruction and meet the needs of

my struggling readers?

*How might these supports affect all of my fourth grade readers?

Findings

Student Survey Results

At the start of the research period, I had each student in the class complete a multiple

choice answer survey that was to provide more insight into their views of themselves as a reader

and their attitudes toward reading. In reading their responses, I was surprised by their views. I

had identified them as struggling readers who performed in

the lower third in my class for reading. However, they

viewed themselves as readers who read "about the same"

or "better" than others. When choosing what type of

reader they are, they noted themselves as "ok" or "good".

> "I think I am getting much better at reading."

When comparing the responses of the focus group to the responses of the entire class, they were

not significantly different. I was expecting that they may have seen themselves as struggling

readers, however this was not necessarily the case. I was pleasantly surprised that they at least

viewed themselves in a positive light as readers. As teachers, maintaining a confident approach

to the work at hand is sometimes the biggest obstacle. It seemed I already had these readers

eager for the work ahead of us.

Since the results of a multiple-choice survey did not yield enough data for me in terms of

motivation and direction for our reading time together, I then administered open-ended questions

to the class (See Appendix B). I took into account all student responses, but the responses of my

focus group helped to guide my research. Their responses were simplistic but basically led me to

see that they like to read different genres, they did not enjoy writing about their reading, and

enjoyed playing games and using the computers during our reading block.   These responses did

not change much of what I had in mind as strategies to implement to help these struggling

readers. With this being the case, the survey responses at the end of the research period would

prove more informative.

At the end of the ten week period, I had all of the students provide responses to open-

ended questions and reflect on our reading instruction. In analyzing the student responses of my

focus group while also considering my focus question, I was able to draw the following

conclusions:

*students desire more time for reading and reading instruction

*students enjoyed the idea of having choice in the books they read for small group instruction

*students stated that they are good at and like coding a text

> *"My favorite part of reading time is the book clubbing. I like to hear other people's thoughts about our book."*

*students enjoyed participating in book club discussions

Although there were additional positive responses in student post reflections, these conclusions were noted most among the focus group and provided direct feedback to the modifications made to our reading instruction. Responses of the other students were very similar in nature to those of the focus group. In all, students in the focus group had a positive response to the changes and as a result, recognized areas of growth within themselves as readers.

Teacher Reflection

It is through the analysis of my journals and student work over the research period that has provided me with the most valuable information, some of which correlates to the student responses of the process. My journals and observations kept centering around the following themes:

a. Novelty and Choice

b. Close Reading Strategies

Novelty and Choice

My first journal entry summed up much of what I noticed over the course of my action research, that students are eager to rise to new challenges and enjoy change. There were many "YES!" statements over the course of the research period.

> I called the 6 students over to the table. I had added two new students from [my co-teacher's] group as my focus group now. When I mentioned they would all be in this new reading group with me, E.G. immediately

whispered, "YES!" I know being with these particular boys (and change in

teacher?) was probably a huge motivation.

The focus group had several changes coming their way with regards to our small group instruction. Their instructional time with me was extended each day. They also used the *RAZ Kids* online program and participated in book club discussions once a week. I had developed new schedule templates that we filled in together at the start of each week. We moved away from the daily schedule of the same three literacy centers to a weekly schedule based on their needs. The students would still be participating in reading games (a very popular center among students) however their time would be better utilized with structured activities that addressed their literacy needs, such as communicating their thinking and improving fluency. The act of filling out the schedule with me at the start of each week made them feel as though they had input into their learning. We filled in their learning centers and goals for the week together. The students would even foresee schedule conflicts as we developed their centers together. I did not anticipate creating a schedule would create such enthusiasm among the students.

Once groups and schedules were established, I needed to ensure that my focus group had quality texts that would support the direction of my instruction. At the start of the ten-week period, we were diving deeper into informational texts. I used the *Reading A-Z* site because it provided a wide range of texts at a particular reading level. Since these texts are available online with the option for a print version, I had students choose the texts from the website at their given level. The novelty of navigating a computer to find books and read their summaries, as well as coming to a compromise with their fellow readers to choose one book, was extremely motivating. The students were excited to discuss their reasons for choosing a book while considering the opinion of others in the process. This process of choosing books helped to build

critical skills for these students as well. Once we began instruction for the chosen book, students were eager to share their ideas and thinking because of its high interest.

The fact that I now had more highly motivated students created an immediate impact on one of the areas I was hoping to improve upon with my focus group-discussion! Prior to the changes in our literacy block, the small group reading sessions for my focus group were vastly different from my other higher level reading groups.   Discussions were led by me and I found myself doing most of the talking. It was a challenge to engage them in an exchange of ideas or feel comfortable taking risks to answer questions about a text.

Choice in their reading combined with weekly book clubs had a tremendous impact on their willingness to talk about their reading. The book clubs allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere that sparked conversation. Another factor could be that I was not always physically present for all or part of their conversations. It occurred to me that maybe my presence inhibited some of their conversations. I separated the group during their book clubs into a discussion group of only boys and a discussion group of only the girls. One reason for doing so is I felt six students in a discussion group was too big for sharing their thinking. I also felt that D.D, the only girl in my original focus group, had challenges in expressing herself verbally. Placing her in a partner group with the other girl that was added to the group for D.D.'s benefit, helped her to come out of her comfort zone and start talking. By the end of the research period, the focus group worked together as one book club that was able to self-direct their discussions and take an active approach to discussing books of their choosing.

I have come to realize that providing ownership and choice for student learning brings about motivation and a positive attitude toward learning. I never thought that filling out a schedule

would build excitement for students, but it seemed to set them off for a week of serious reading! They also wanted to TALK about a book that they had power in choosing. These changes combined with weekly book talks and new literacy centers, had these struggling readers excited about reading.

Close Reading Strategies

This year, with the full implementation of Common Core and a new district ELA curriculum, there were several shifts in my instructional approaches in order to meet the new demands in literacy. Students need to dig deep into a text, analyze, and critically think more complex texts. I was eager to implement close reading strategies as well as a more structured approach to noting their thinking as a reader.

Over the research period, my whole group instruction focused on the explicit teaching of coding strategies by using a shared text. In order to do this, students used sticky notes to track their thinking and were expected to carry over these skills to small group instruction. Prior to the implementation of these structured close reading strategies, my focus group of readers were not aware of when their comprehension was breaking down or stopping to note unfamiliar words they were coming across. I believe the idea of specific "codes" helped them to focus their metacognitive strategies. I also allowed them to use pens during certain steps of the coding process so as to increase their motivation to do so.

It only took a couple of weeks before I was able to see the group grabbing for sticky notes, writing in the text, and recording their thinking as readers. The use of texts from *Reading A-Z* allowed my students to write, circle and underline within the text itself which made the process much easier than sticky notes. An excerpt from my reflection journal sums up my observations after one of my small group lessons:

Their texts show evidence of coding, even quiet D.D. offered to share

information from our shared text, working off of one of her notes. I was

pleasantly surprised about our level of conversation, even after a long

weekend away from the text. Even when Brian was whisper reading with me,

he stopped to monitor and code-without my prompting! ☺

Student Progress

Although student responses through surveys and my journal reflections provided valuable

insight into strategies for my struggling readers, assessment is a critical component of our

teaching and what we are accountable for with our instruction. In my school we are responsible

for assessing our students' reading level three times a year and reporting the results to our

reading specialist. These assessments provided another form of baseline data prior to the start of

my action plan.

Once the research period concluded, I requested the help of the reading specialist to conduct

a similar assessment to the students in my focus group. We would note changes in their reading

levels and application of strategies.   We were pleased with the results. Out of the six students in

the focus group, four (the boys) moved up one reading level. The one girl, who was not part of

the original focus group, actually moved up two reading levels! I had been hesitant about her

joining a group slightly above her instructional level, but she was able to keep pace with the

other students and rise to the level of their reading strategies! Needless to say, progress is what

we want to see and these readers had certainly demonstrated that.

However, the quieter student, D.D. showed a regression of one reading level. This was

disappointing because my observations of her reading behaviors showed positive changes and

growth in her reading. She was now talking and sharing in our small reading groups, a huge

accomplishment for her! As educators, we do need to keep in mind that a reading assessment is just one tool to analyze student progress. I am curious if factors such as her classification during the research period or not having had any other interventions in place prior to this year, may affect her performance. We are pleased that supports are in place to help her continue to succeed.

Implications

The results of my action research have provided me with insight as to how to move forward with my literacy instruction, especially in supporting struggling readers. I was able to work closely with our reading specialist and supervisor for elementary education in order to implement meaningful literacy instruction that coincided with Common Core and district expectations. My observations have started a discussion about the organization of our literacy block, especially at the intermediate level. I was able to organize my center work, use of reading journals and whole group instruction with more flexibility and base it on the needs of my students, rather than district mandates of the past.

With regards to small group reading instruction, we are moving toward the notion of not just grouping our students by guided reading level, but also by skill needs. I was able to experiment with this type of flexible grouping among my other reading groups during this research period. I arranged reading groups to work on specific strategies such as fluency and critical thinking skills. Reorganizing our instructional approaches may require some professional development so that classroom teachers are able to leave the comfort zone of leveled reading groups and move toward more fluid, flexible, skill-based groups. Being that novelty and choice provided positive outcomes in my study, the flexibility in grouping students will allow for similar results.

I understand that my approach of providing novelty and choice for my students was not a unique idea. However, I was able to see firsthand the positive effects of this practice. My struggling readers showed excitement and an eagerness to read that I was seeking. With motivation to read, I feel the strategies that I then implemented were all the more successful.

My district is also looking into providing professional development opportunities in the areas of close reading and critical thinking strategies. My action plan also focused on more explicit teaching of close reading strategies. I felt that these strategies provided much needed support to all of my students, particularly my struggling readers. I believe my experience with it this year will help to guide my fellow colleagues as we move ahead in the future.

Limitations

Although my results for the most part were quite positive, my work did not come without many frustrations and obstacles. The student survey responses and my journal reflections both expressed similar concerns. The time of year and the harsh winter weather caused many snow days, early dismissals, and delayed openings. These schedule interruptions made it difficult to maintain consistency in our literacy instruction. The individualized schedules that were created with my students at the start of each week at times did not get fully executed or had to be frequently readjusted. The task of rearranging group meetings and center activities took time. My schedule this year is quite restrictive. It does not allow for me and my co-teacher to move our instructional periods around because of unforeseen schedule changes. This therefore made it impossible for us to have all or some of our literacy block on some days. It was disheartening to see some days of planned instruction be pushed aside.

Time was also a factor for me in planning for my groups and creating more individualized centers. My co-teacher and I also had to meet frequently just to organize our literacy time. In order to maximize our instructional time and stay within a restricted schedule, we had to take a lot of time to plan and gather meaningful resources.

The use of the *RAZ Kids* program also proved problematic with time management. My focus group was really engaged in this tool, but the time to complete a book, assess afterward and then record their oral reading was too time consuming. I found that I was frequently adjusting the way in which to incorporate this program. For a few weeks students were completing the second reading and quiz at home, but that enthusiasm did not last long. I finally had set their schedule as using *RAZ* every other week. By doing so, my struggling readers then had time to participate in the other reading centers and also free up the computers for other students in the class to use.

This then brings up the other challenge in my action plan which was the lack of resources. Our classroom has only four computers which did not allow for all students to use them as much as I would like. Not all students were provided equal time on *RAZ Kids* or other technology based literacy activities. We do have access to a computer lab, but it was not available during our literacy block. Next year we are expected to have Google Chrome books assigned to each homeroom class, which may then alleviate the lack of computers during our reading time.

Reading materials were also lacking given our new curriculum and to support the teaching of close reading strategies during whole group instruction. I spent much time and energy gathering books and passages to teach and model these strategies. My reading specialist

was well aware of the work it took for me to gather materials. She provided her support and knows that in the coming year, classroom teachers will need access to quality materials.

In retrospect, I would have begun my action research a few weeks earlier in hopes to avoid the winter weather but also to have conducted more baseline assessments. I feel that in analyzing my data, I would have liked to have more formal evidence of student growth. My reading specialist was able to provide valuable information at the end of the action plan and so she may have been able to reaffirm my observations of student behaviors at the start of the program.

Emerging Questions

As educators, we constantly strive to deliver effective instruction and implement research based strategies that benefit our students. My struggling readers were able to demonstrate growth and react positively to the strategies implemented. Therefore, I have some answers to my initial research question, *How do I support my struggling readers?* Yet, there are now new questions which need to be addressed as I move forward.

My first emerging question is: *With the advent of Common Core and changes in district expectations for literacy instruction, what are the expectations of the classroom teacher?* In speaking with my colleagues over the course of this year, there is a general feeling of uncertainty as to what we are accountable for. In the past, we had to keep specific reading journals and keep certain documentation records. We were also told that we are moving away from "guided reading", but have not been provided with other expectations or resources for our literacy instruction.

Another question which arises is: *How might the expectation of flexible, skill based groups for reading be attainable for teachers who do not have the support of another adult in the room?* As mentioned, time and organization were an obstacle for me throughout this process. I feel it was made easier and I was able to provide focused instruction to my struggling readers, by having a co-teacher in the room all day. My struggling students, and in turn my higher level students, were able to receive more of my time and energy. My co-teacher also teaches reading groups at the same time I do, so my groupings are smaller. There are many teachers in our building who do not have another educator in the room and so must meet the needs of all their students, struggling or not, with the same time and resource constraints that I faced.

Which leads to my last emerging question: *How can time with our students be better utilized when there are only more demands being put on our scheduling?* Unfortunately, we are not given much flexibility to make our schedules and so again, time becomes the biggest obstacle we face. In my classroom, there are also other factors that affect our schedule such as pull-out services (Wilson Lab, speech, OT, PT, and ESL) and instrumental lessons (chorus, band and orchestra). We are hoping to implement a more cross-curricular approach with literacy so that these interruptions don't interfere with student learning.

Conclusion

It is my hope to build motivation and strong reading skills for my struggling readers yet in effect build a community of active and engaged readers for all of my fourth graders. I was seeking to reorganize my literacy instruction to better meet Common Core expectations and district guidelines. I attempted to stay at the forefront of where the district is headed and possibly be a model of changes to come.

In conducting this study to support my struggling readers, I was able to gain insight into effective strategies for literacy instruction. I was able to converse with other professionals in my building to implement what is hopefully the start of some successful strategies. These include skill-based groups, student choice and goal setting, as well as close reading strategies.

 In working more closely with my focus group of readers, I was able to build their confidence as readers and create more active readers who contributed to our overall learning environment. They are now students who are eager to share their thinking in our small group discussions and understand the importance of seeking meaning as a reader.

My goal was to bring their skills up to grade level and avoid the need for further interventions. At this time, I am very pleased with their progress and I am certain they are equipped with strategies that will support them as readers.

In referring back to the quote from Pam Allyn, I would like to think that I helped my students to do well as readers and in turn, move on from our year together with a love for reading and learning.

Implementation Plan

The results of my work will provide me and my colleagues with some direction as to how to restructure our literacy block next year. We need to reimagine ways to maximize our time with our students and see that we now are being given more flexibility in how to meet our students' needs. We will also reevaluate our long range plans so that our instructional time is maximized across the curriculum. This year, we unfortunately were not given the new materials in time to do so.

My experience with close reading strategies will also be shared with my colleagues. I was able to gather resources that I found very easy to implement and guided my instruction. These can serve as a tool for classroom teachers just starting these strategies.

Lastly, my results will be shared with my building reading specialist, elementary supervisor, and principal in hopes that some of the obstacles I faced will be addressed as we look forward to success in our literacy instruction next year.

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Appendix A
Parent Information Letter

January 2014

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am currently doing graduate work in education at The College of New Jersey, and I am preparing to begin work on an action research project. This project is a requirement for my master's degree and it is designed to help improve my practice as an educator. My research topic is students' motivation and growth as readers, which I will pursue in the context of our literacy instruction. Better understanding of what motivates students as readers and implementing more individualized instruction will help me to improve our literacy instruction and hopefully contribute to improving education at our school.

I would like to inform you of my action research project as a means of communicating the continued pursuit of best practices in our classroom. The data I would collect specifically for the action research project involves the recording of my observations about student attitudes and behaviors toward the required reading and instruction for the class, and so, generally would not require any extra work on the part of your child as a student. Y our child will be informally surveyed before and after the action plan in order to guide our instruction and gauge results. I also want to stress that this action research project is an extension of the work I do as part of my normal responsibilities as a teacher.

I will probably include some quotes and photographs from our literacy instruction in my written and oral research reports, which I will present at an event in May 2014. If so, I will notify you in advance. In addition, I may share my observations and findings with fellow teachers, if I think my findings would help others improve their teaching.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may email me at _____.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Appendix B
Student Reading Survey

Name_____   Date: _____

Sample A: I am in _____.

     Second grade

     Third grade

     Fourth grade

     Fifth grade

Sample B: I am a _____.

     boy

     girl

1. My friends think I am _____.
   a very good reader
   a good reader
   an OK reader
   a poor reader

2. Reading a book is something I like to do.
   never
   not very often
   sometimes
   often

3. I read _____.

    not as well as my friends

    about the same as my friends

    a little better than my friends

    a lot better than my friends

4. My best friends think reading is _____.

    really fun

    fun

    ok to do

    no fun at all

5. When I come to a word I don't know, I can _____.

    almost always figure it out

    sometimes figure it out

    almost never figure it out

    never figure it out

6. I tell my friends about good books I read.

    I never do this

    I almost never do this.

    I do this some of the time.

    I do this a lot.

7. When I am reading by myself, I understand _____.

    almost everything I read

    some of what I read

    almost none of what I read

    none of what I read

8. People who read a lot are _____.
    very interesting
    interesting
    not very interesting
    boring

9. I am _____.
    A poor reader
    An OK reader
    A good reader
    A very good reader

10. I think libraries are _____.
    a great place to spend time

    an interesting place to spend time

    an Ok place to spend time

    a boring place to spend time

11. I worry about what other kids think about my reading _____.
    every day
    almost every day
    once in a while
    never

12. Knowing how to read well is _____.
    not very important
    sort of important
    important
    very important

13. When my teacher asks me a question about what I have read, I
    _____.

    Can never think of an answer
    Have trouble thinking of an answer
    Sometimes think of an answer
    Always think of an answer

14. I think reading is _____.
    a boring way to spend time
    an OK way to spend time
    an interesting way to spend time
    a great way to spend time

15. Reading is _____.
    very easy for me
    kind of easy for me
    kind of hard for me
    very hard for me

16. When I grow up, I will spend _____.
    none of my time reading
    very little of my time reading
    some of my time reading
    a lot of my time reading

17. When I am in a group talking about books, I _____.
    almost never talk about my ideas
    sometimes talk about my ideas
    almost always talk about my ideas
    always talk about my ideas

18. I would like for my teacher to read books out loud to the class _____.
    every day
    almost every day
    once in a while
    never

19. When I read out loud, I am a _____.
    poor reader
    OK reader
    good reader
    very good reader

20. When someone gives me a book for a present, I feel _____.

    very happy
    sort of happy
    sort of unhappy
    unhappy

What do you think you have to learn to be a better reader?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What are some things that get you really excited about reading?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Do you know of any books right now that you'd like to read?

_____

_____

Have any of your teachers done something with reading that you really enjoyed?

_____

_____

_____

Not really enjoyed?

_____

_____

_____

What are your thoughts on Reader's Workshop?

_____

_____

_____